

Alcohol and other drugs

People with intellectual disability should be involved in all decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Some people can make decisions alone and some people will need support. It is critical that supporters know the person's will and preferences to make sure the right support is provided and the right decision is made.

People with intellectual disability can have trouble with alcohol and other drugs. These are often people who lead fairly independent lives and do not have strong support from families and support services.

It can be very hard for these people to get the help that they need for their drug problems. They may not recognise the problem and it can be hard to find appropriate services.

However, there is support available to help people with intellectual disability who have drug problems.

People with intellectual disability and drugs

The most common drugs that people with intellectual disability have trouble with are alcohol and cannabis. Other drugs include ecstasy, cocaine, heroin and prescription medication.

Overuse of alcohol has many bad effects on health. Health experts say that consuming more than two drinks a day increases the long term risk of death from illness and injury. Other drugs are illegal and also have bad effects on health, including mental health issues.

Misuse of alcohol and other drugs reduces self control which can lead to accidents, being exploited and getting into trouble with the law.

Helping the person to seek help

The first step is for the person to recognise they have a problem. People are often reluctant to accept they have a drug problem. An intellectual disability can make it even harder for the person to understand the problem and seek help.

If you are trying to help a person see that they need help:

- Choose the moment to talk. You will have a much better chance if the person is sober and you are both calm.
- Try to have open discussions where the person tells you about their drug use in ordinary conversation. Do lots of listening and show your concern. Discuss the pros and cons of drug use.
- Understand the drug – get the latest information on the drug and its effects.

Sometimes it will be a criminal charge that leads to a focus on a person's drug problem. There are some drug programs linked to the Local Court. Also, lawyers will often want to get their client into drug treatment to reduce the chances of a heavy sentence.

Treatments for drug problems

Treatments for alcohol and other drug problems include:

- Case management.
- Individual and group counselling.
- Self help groups like Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous and SMART Recovery.
- Going to stay in a drug-free setting for a period of rehabilitation.
- Detoxification in a supervised setting
- Opioid Treatment Programs such as methadone and buprenorphine.

Often a person needs a combination of treatments. Successful treatment can take a number of attempts and a long time.

How do I find a drug service?

If a person has taken drugs and suddenly becomes ill, dial 000 and ask for an ambulance.

Otherwise, you can access a local public drug and alcohol service by contacting your Local Health District or ring the Alcohol and Other Drugs Information Service (ADIS). See 'For more information'.

Lawyers and case managers often find it hard to get alcohol and other drug services for their clients with intellectual disability. Drug treatment services may say that their programs will not work for people with intellectual disability. But anti-discrimination law says that health services need to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of clients with a disability. You can expect drug treatment services to do this. You can offer them help to make these adjustments.

Helping the drug service work with the person

A person with intellectual disability may find it hard to understand the language and concepts a drug worker is used to. The worker may need to communicate more simply with the person. A disability case manager, advocate or family member might be able to help the drug worker to adjust their usual approach. And they might be able to help the person understand what the drug worker has said and apply it day to day.

Also, the drug treatment will usually need to be part of an individual plan to meet the overall lifestyle and behaviour support needs of the person. The person will usually need a worker from disability services to develop this plan.

People with intellectual disability who use drugs often lack self esteem, positive relationships and activities. They are vulnerable to peer pressure. Drug services and disability services need to address these problems.

Some people with drug problems also have mental health issues. It may be very hard to treat the drug problem if the person is not receiving mental health treatment too.

What if the drug treatment services say “No”?

If you feel that a drug treatment service has unfairly refused to assist a person with intellectual disability, try talking to the service manager. If that does not work, you can go to a complaints body. See the Rights and Complaints fact sheet.

For more information

Alcohol and Other Drugs Information Service (ADIS)

A 24 hour 7 days a week confidential telephone counselling, support, referrals and information for those affected by alcohol or other drugs.

(02) 9361 8000 or Toll free **1800 422 599** (for people outside Sydney)

Complex Needs Capable, a practice resource for drug and alcohol services

www.complexneeds capable.org.au

Drug and alcohol service intake, NSW Health

Contact numbers for area intake services, consumer publications and information other drug programs.

www.health.nsw.gov.au/aod/Pages/contact-service.aspx

Mental Health, Health NSW

www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/pages/default.aspx

Your Room, for facts about alcohol and other drugs

www.yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au/Pages/home.aspx

You might be interested in these fact sheets

- **Helping the doctor understand the person**
- **Mental health**
- **Rights and complaints**

This fact sheet was updated in **2018**.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to look at the information in this fact sheet carefully with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.